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de Bakker, F.G.A.

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Exploring Networks of Activism on Corporate Social Responsibility: Suggestions for a Research Agenda

Frank G.A. de Bakker

One increasingly important development for which firms need to find innovative solutions is the growing attention to corporate social responsibility (CSR). The shaping of CSR can be seen as a process in which firms and a variety of other actors are involved. This paper highlights the role of activists, and especially the role of networks of activism, in the process of (re-)defining, and sometimes innovating, the role of firms in issues of CSR. This can be seen as a process of institutional change in which norms are changed. Therefore, this paper contains a short theoretical examination of three relevant literatures (social movements, institutional theory and social network analysis) to flesh out some of their commonalities in order to develop proposals for a further research agenda for understanding how networks of activist groups (and firms) operate in shaping corporate social responsibility – an issue highly relevant in understanding the changing role of business in society. In addition, such insights can also contribute to understanding the role of activists in influencing innovation trajectories.

Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become an important issue for firms and they need to anticipate many different pressures related to this responsibility. Firms need to find new ways of coping with a variety of different stakeholder demands. The notion of CSR has received considerable attention over the past decade, both in the professional and the academic management literatures (e.g., Fisscher, Nijhof & Steensma, 2003; Burchell, 2008), while it has also been addressed in the area of innovation management, often focusing on issues of sustainability (e.g., Rodriguez, Ricart & Sanchez, 2002; Benn & Baker, 2009; Bos-Brouwers, 2010), or on innovation in controversial areas such as genetic modification (Weisenfeld, 2003). Numerous studies have been published on CSR and its definition, application or measurement (for reviews, see de Bakker, Groenewegen & den Hond, 2005 or Lee, 2008). In several studies a link between CSR and innovation is examined, for instance through concepts such as 'inclusive innovation' (Nijhof, Fisscher & Looise, 2002), or through investigations of the link between corporate social performance with innovation and

industry differentiation (Hull & Rothenberg, 2008). Often CSR is defined quite broadly, for example as encompassing 'the economic, legal, ethical and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time' (Carroll, 1979: 500) or as 'situations where the firm goes beyond compliance and engages in actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by law' (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001: 118). Yet, how to incorporate these societal requirements, either in regular corporate policy or in innovation policy, seems to remain a complicated issue for firms.

In the literature, emphasis is often placed on firms' efforts in dealing with these requirements, for instance through illustrative case studies. In this paper I do *not* take such a firm's perspective as my point of departure, but highlight the way one specific category of stakeholders tries to influence the shaping of CSR: I look at activist groups and discuss the ways they work together in their efforts, because this results in several alternative angles from which to study the development of CSR. Activist groups are a category of potentially influential stakeholders but also

one that is difficult to grasp. Examining the ways activist groups operate therefore can contribute to increasing the mutual understanding between firms and activist groups; an insight that can also be useful for studying interactions with stakeholders in innovation processes in which business and society interactions are central.

Given the varying expectations and the focus on achieving some social good, CSR involves many different actors, all of whom try to influence what is to be seen as CSR. In such processes, activist groups¹ are increasingly considered relevant actors to business organizations (cf. Hendry, 2005; Eesley & Lenox, 2006; Bartley, 2007). Direct interactions between activists and firms on CSR issues have become more prominent, as both the private and NGO or activist group sectors were growing while public sector involvements eroded (Yaziji & Doh, 2009). This implies that the definition and shaping of CSR is often left to firms and some of their stakeholders. In this paper I argue that it is useful to highlight the role of networks of activist groups to understand the way CSR is shaped, because such networks often require firms to respond to their claims. After all, the process of defining, shaping and controlling issues of CSR can be regarded as a process of deliberately maintaining and/or changing certain norms; a process in which different actors are involved, for instance by framing and redefining their roles and positions to shape the (re-)institutionalization of CSR (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, 2011; Matten & Moon, 2008). This paper highlights some of the new demands networks of activists impose on firms.

Although the roles of many activist groups in framing CSR have already been documented (see den Hond & de Bakker, 2007; Yaziji & Doh, 2009; van Huijstee & Glasbergen, 2010), I argue that it is useful to look beyond these interactions between individual activist groups and firms to further untangle the process through which different activist groups try to influence the shaping of CSR. Even though many activists' campaigns are targeted at an individual firm, or a small set of firms, they often aim to influence a wider range of firms, and they often influence other activist groups' strategic options, not only at the moment of interaction but possibly also afterwards.

Studying the interplay between firms and activist groups therefore should go beyond these dyadic interactions and look at a wider range of stakeholders. Such research probably also should be extended over a longer period of time to capture the effects of campaigns –

processes of institutional change often involve a longer time period to unfold. Over time, different actors are likely to be involved in such a process. Turning towards a social network approach, then, could be useful as network properties are likely to influence this interplay. Starting from an activist group perspective, the questions addressed in this conceptual paper therefore are 'how do (networks of) activist groups operate on issues of CSR and what tactics do they use over time to influence institutional change on issues of CSR?'.

Combining insights from social movement theory and institutional theory has shown to be productive in theorizing on the attempts by activists groups to guard or change institutional logics (e.g., Lounsbury, Ventresca & Hirsch, 2003; McAdam & Scott, 2005; Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008; Rao, 2009). Still, as Schneiberg and Lounsbury (2008: 665) note, 'our knowledge of how movements create favourable political contexts for the diffusion and translation of alternatives is relatively undeveloped.' This also seems to hold true for the shaping and diffusion of CSR. Meanwhile, social movement studies also demonstrate a long-standing interest in the link between social movements and networks (e.g., Bandy & Smith, 2005; Saunders, 2007; Tindall, 2007), but often not in relation to institutional change. Following these observations, it seems helpful to study the way activist groups form and use social networks in aiming for institutional change to shape or change CSR. After all, the dynamic interplay between different types of activist groups and other members of a particular organizational field are likely to determine the way and extent to which institutional arrangements concerning CSR are modified. Understanding the role of activists' social networks, then, is a useful next step in understanding collective activism vis-à-vis firms on these issues of CSR institutionalization.

Using insights from these different strands of theory, I aim to develop theoretical notions on the influence of networks of activism on the (re-)shaping of CSR. In doing so, I theorize on the role and functioning of these networks of activism in the political process that prompts institutional change regarding CSR-related issues over time. This ties in with recent work on how networks of activists impact firms (Schepers, 2006) or entire industries (Schurman, 2004), and can also be linked to studies that focus on the role of stakeholders in innovation processes, for instance through co-evolutionary approaches (Benn & Baker, 2009).

To theoretically explore how networks of activist groups operate vis-à-vis firms and

what tactics they, and firms alike, use over time to establish institutional change on CSR within an organizational field, I draw on a combination of neo-institutional theory, social movement studies and social network studies. In the next sections, I will briefly discuss elements of the different literatures involved, focusing on some frameworks and then aim for a synthesis in order to generate several avenues for further research to understand the functioning of the firm as a political actor. Before I turn to these three theoretical streams, however, I will briefly introduce the shaping of CSR as a political process as a context for this theoretical exploration.

Shaping CSR as a Political Process

In this paper I view the shaping of CSR as a process of institutional change in which existing institutional logics are contested to redefine what is seen as the responsibilities of firms. In such processes of institutional change, firms and activists both act as institutional entrepreneurs, developing new practices and standards on what is to be considered responsible behaviour. Institutional entrepreneurship has been defined as 'activities of actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones' (Maguire, Hardy & Lawrence, 2004: 657). Different actors have an interest in shaping, or institutionalizing, CSR in a specific way; often they rely on each other to gain acceptance for their definition of CSR and to secure its wider diffusion.

For firms and activist groups alike, this is a fairly new development, different from the traditional political activities on CSR-related issues which were mostly targeted at national or transnational policy makers, and different from the general conception of CSR as an add-on to business-as-usual. According to Lenox and Eesley (2009), activists increasingly see the application of a variety of 'private politics' (Baron, 2003) as more effective than approaching all sorts of public institutions. In a sense, both firms and activists are working to reinvent the firm and its position in society. This is changing the relationship between them; if activist groups for instance 'are able to work with corporations to achieve specific goals, then what appears to be co-optation may simply be one aspect of a symbiotic relationship that positively affects both parties' (Trumpy, 2008: 481). On the other hand, other firms and activists remain clear adversaries, heavily contesting each other's claims on issues relating to CSR. The interaction between

them on these issues nevertheless is important. In shaping CSR, firms might, to a certain extent, need activist groups to gain legitimacy as these groups act as important collaborators in partnerships, as stimulators or watchdogs on corporate (social) activities, as promoters to customers, or as judges in the outcomes of firms' activities, to name just a few possible roles.

Activists thus take part in the process of defining and guiding responsibilities of firms. As Whittier (2004: 536) argued: 'Activists promote particular ways of understanding the world. When movements are influential in the social movement sector, their frames and discourses affect how other activists frame their issues and the discourses they draw on to justify their claims.' Depending on their ideological position, activist groups determine what they see as acceptable corporate behaviour (Zald, 2000; Snow, 2004; den Hond & de Bakker, 2007). What are the standards to be applied? How to find a balance between corporate power and public interest? And how to exert influence on firms to change existing disavowed behaviour?

To answer such questions, and to create broader support for possible solutions, activist groups are likely to rely on wider networks of firms and activists, sometimes as collaborators, sometimes as adversaries. In trying to influence the shaping of CSR, they engage in what Lawrence and Suddaby (2005: 215) call 'institutional work – the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions', a concept closely related to institutional entrepreneurship. Often their attempts to evoke institutional change go beyond the single firm, as their campaign aims at establishing change within the wider organizational field, which has been defined as 'a community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside the field' (Scott, 1995: 56). For instance, although Shell was targeted by Greenpeace in the Brent Spar controversy, the activist group aimed to make a statement towards the entire oil industry (Grolin, 1998). Likewise, activists targeting Phillip Morris aimed to affect the entire tobacco field (Derry & Waikar, 2008). Still, as Wooten and Hoffman (2008) note, such definitions of organizational field often are fairly static ones, whereas recent research is becoming more interested in, for instance, processes of agency, change and variation to understand how fields are formed and how collective rationality plays out in these processes. The debate on CSR and the processes through which it is shaped lend

themselves well to study how networks of activist groups try to influence institutional change on issues of CSR. This view also ties in with recent observations in the literature:

Organizational institutionalism and social movement theory offer complementary insights to address what we might call 'collective corporate social responsibility.' Collective corporate social responsibility (CCSR) is the concept that organizations in a sector or field are perceived to owe an obligation to certain constituencies (Davis & Anderson, 2008: 377).

In a world where government is claimed to be retreating and where mechanisms of global governance are heavily debated, understanding the dynamic interplay between activist strategies and firms' responses is a relevant area of research to understand the way these obligations are met. As I depart from an activist perspective, I will now briefly discuss their tactics and strategies in shaping CSR before I examine a social network approach.

How Activist Groups Shape CSR: Tactics and Strategies

To study the role of activist tactics to influence institutional change on issues of CSR, it is useful to identify the tactics and strategies they could deploy. What do activists actually do to shape CSR? When viewing the development of CSR as a process of institutional change, activist groups first need to exert influence over this process. To do this, they can use a range of different strategies and tactics. In general, these strategies and tactics are well documented (e.g., Taylor & van Dyke, 2004) but such research is often focused (only) on non-corporate activism. Still, a growing literature is developing on how activist groups have applied different tactics to influence firms over time (Seel & Plows, 2000; Carmin & Balser, 2002; Zietsma & Winn, 2008; den Hond, de Bakker & de Haan, 2010). Different hypotheses have been proposed, for instance on activist groups' readiness to mobilize vis-à-vis firms (Rowley & Moldoveanu, 2003), their selection of targets (Spar & La Mure, 2003), and of strategies and tactics (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007), as well as the outcomes of these interactions (Rowley, 1997), also at the broader social movement level (Whittier, 2004). Theorizing to what extent different tactics could be observed at different points in time in different interaction processes between activist groups and firms is one step in tracing the way activist networks operate (den Hond, de Bakker & de

Haan, 2010). By making and leveraging all sorts of claims on what firms should or should not do, activist groups seek to influence corporate policies and practices on issues relating to what they believe to be the social or environmental responsibilities of firms (Spar & La Mure, 2003; Schepers, 2006; de Bakker & den Hond, 2007; Yaziji & Doh, 2009). How do they do so?

Combining social movement and institutional literatures, den Hond and de Bakker (2007) argued that activists aim to deinstitutionalize disavowed field frames and/or to (re-)institutionalize alternative ones they favour. These field frames comprise the technical, legal or market standards that define the normal modes of operation within a specific organizational field (Lawrence, 1999; Lounsbury, Ventresca & Hirsch, 2003). In terms of the topic of this paper, such field frames define what is generally seen as socially responsible behaviour within a particular organizational field. Den Hond and de Bakker (2007) proposed a typology of tactics activist groups would use in such processes, based on activist groups' dependence on participation and on the logic of influence they draw upon (i.e., either through symbolic or material damage or gain). Investigating to what extent these tactics are indeed observed at different points in time in different interaction processes between activist groups and firms can be useful in tracing changes in tactical choices within an organizational field. After all, these tactics not only form the traceable outcomes of an activist groups' strategic choices to evoke institutional change, but also provide insight into the functioning of social networks in these institutional change processes. Who are the activist groups co-operating with? How are they related? How are tasks divided among them? To what extent do they interact with firms, and with which firms?

Questions on how activist groups operate in trying to gain leverage over entire industries are increasingly addressed in the social movement literature (Bartley, 2007; Schurman, 2004). When activist groups try to change the institutional conditions in an organizational field (Bartley, 2007; den Hond & de Bakker, 2007; Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008; Rao, 2009), they want to change the standards and norms within an industry or within an organizational field (King & Soule, 2007). Changing norms on what is considered responsible corporate behaviour within an organizational field often involves striving for institutional change. For activist groups both collaboration and contention with firms can be instrumental in getting closer to this overall ambition. Even more so, it is likely that across a broader move-

ment, different activist groups will also pursue different goals in the institutional change process. Some groups will focus on the deinstitutionalization of an established, disavowed corporate practice, while other groups are likely to strive for the institutionalization of new, alternative practices. Den Hond and de Bakker (2007) distinguish between radical and reformative activist groups. According to Zald and McCarthy (1980: 8), activist groups that 'offer a more comprehensive version of the problem and more drastic change as a solution... are normally called radical.' Activist groups at the other end of the spectrum, then, are the moderate or reformist ones. Den Hond and de Bakker (2007) suggest that reformative activist groups spend more of their resources and time on activities aimed at (re-)institutionalization than at deinstitutionalization, whereas radical activist groups spend more of their resources and time on activities aimed at deinstitutionalization than at (re-)institutionalization. In brief, reformists want to establish alternative practices or field frames, whereas radicals want to battle existing practices. 'Reformative groups are taken to believe that although companies are part of the problem, they can also be part of the solution. By contrast, radical groups do not believe that companies can be part of the solution' (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007: 903). Ideology then 'is assumed to provide the rationale for defending or challenging various social arrangements and conditions' (Snow, 2004: 396), for instance the level of corporate social responsibility. Den Hond and de Bakker (2007) argue that the degree of radicalism in activist groups' ideologies influences the groups' choices of particular tactics at the operational level.

Studying such interactions should not be limited to the position and activities of different activist groups. Firms are also, and arguably increasingly, assuming an active role on these issues, acting as institutional entrepreneurs as well. Just like activist groups, they try to influence what is to be seen as acceptable corporate behaviour: what does corporate social responsibility entail?² This means that both the claims of activist groups vis-à-vis firms and the way they express these claims might be changing. After all, activist groups will have to anticipate another type of firm, one that may work in a different way. Partnerships and forms of co-operation in networks then might become one logical set of tactics to deploy; highly critical scrutiny and contestation might be another one, depending on both activist groups' and firms' properties, as well as on the institutional setting they operate in (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007; Matten & Moon,

2008; van Huijstee & Glasbergen, 2010). In the next section I will discuss some issues from social network theory that appear to be helpful in understanding the process of institutional change, and the role of these two central categories of actors therein.

Why Social Networks are Important

Although many activist groups are quite actively involved in debates on CSR, the way these groups try to gain influence over firms' behaviour on CSR issues is relatively poorly understood. Quite some studies have been conducted, but attention often is devoted mainly to interactions between activist groups and individual firms (cf. Grolin, 1998), whereas activist groups also engage in more-or-less co-ordinated forms of activism. Less attention is given to the role of networks in activism aimed at influencing firms through field level change. Although there can be huge differences between activist groups acting in one network (Carmin & Balser, 2002), looking at their strategic interplay seems helpful to understand how these groups jointly influence institutional interactions on issues relevant to corporate behaviour on issues of CSR. To understand the way networks of activism operate in trying to influence and change corporate political practices, combining insights from different theoretical perspectives is useful. Network and institutional research, then, are the usual suspects. Still, as Owen-Smith and Powell (2008: 596) indicate, 'research on institutions and networks has proceeded on largely separate trajectories over the past few decades.' In the next subsections, I therefore will discuss social networks, their link to social movements and to institutional change.

What are Social Networks?

Social network theory is about relations among actors. These relations can be considered as both communicative connections influencing worldviews or as stances and in terms of power relations (Podolny, 2001). 'The social network perspective refers to a tradition in social science which focuses on the joint activities of, and continual exchanges between, participants in a social system' (Kenis & Oerlemans, 2008: 289). Dating back to the 1930s, social network analysis has a long history in analysing relationships, either between individuals, teams or organizations (Scott, 2000; Chiesi, 2001). Briefly summarized, 'Social network analysis is a set of tools that allows for the depiction of social networks and

the quantification of various network characteristics' (Lauber, Decker & Knuth, 2008: 679). Within social network studies, two main perspectives can be observed: structural or positional approaches, which emphasize how a network structure results in certain behaviours and beliefs, and relational approaches, which 'allow us to view the pattern of relations as a result of behaviours and beliefs rather than a cause of them' (Saunders, 2007: 231). Applied to social movements, Mische (2003: 259) notes:

Relations in networks are about what people do in interaction. In social movement networks, people do more than simply exchange resources, transmit ideas, or develop identities, activities that many accounts of movement networks have described. Since most participants belong to a variety of social networks at once, they engage in myriad, complex negotiation among the multiple dimensions of their ongoing involvements, which are often embedded in overlapping network formations.

Actors hence are not seen in isolation but as 'embedded within networks of interconnected relationships that provide opportunities for, as well as constraints on, behaviour' (Kenis & Oerlemans, 2008: 290). Social networks have been studied in many different contexts, including in social movement studies (see below) and management studies. From a strategic management angle, Gulati, Nohria and Zaheer (2000) suggested looking at strategic networks, which they describe as consisting of enduring interorganizational ties that are of strategic significance for the firms entering the network. They proposed a strategic view on social networks which could well be applied when the relationships between activist groups and firms are studied. After all, the role of activist groups is increasingly seen as having a potential strategic influence, something firms need to take into account and anticipate. How do activist groups, or more generally, social movement organizations, relate to social networks? In the remainder of this paper, I present some possible applications of social network analysis, more as an illustration of its potential than as a comprehensive overview.

Social Networks and Social Movements

Over four decades ago, Gerlach and Hine (1970: 33) stated: 'We have found that movement organization can be characterized as a network – decentralized, segmentary and reticulate.' Although network studies have been used in studying social movements for

a long time (for an overview, see Diani & McAdam, 2003), much research on networks and social movements has focused on movement recruitment and participation processes or on interorganizational dynamics (Diani, 2002). Considerably less attention has been devoted to the role of activist networks in processes of institutional change. Within a particular social movement, usually a number of activist groups operate, each with their own organizational repertoire of arguments and tactics (Clemens, 1993). As Oliver and Myers (2003: 173) note, 'one central concern about understanding diffusion and networks in protest waves is that we do not actually have straightforward data about the underlying social networks or mobilization processes.' Even though there can be huge differences between activist groups acting within one network, looking at the strategic interplay between groups, and their linkages to different other actors such as firms and government, can be helpful in understanding how these groups jointly influence institutional interactions on issues relevant to corporate behaviour. Furthermore, it seems relevant to map network characteristics over time to trace processes of institutional change and to discover changes in the constellation of actors involved in the process of institutional change.

Diani (2002) argues that social network analysis allows us to systematically study network processes within social movements because the method helps in analysing how actors' embeddedness in networks affects collective action, and how actors create new linkages that influence the development of movement activities. It has, for instance, been argued that institutional norm diffusion requires endorsement via direct linkages at the level of actions, and that such action networks need to be connected to networks of legitimization and governance (Nee & Ingram, 2001). That is, activists need to make sure that their attempts, either to deinstitutionalize certain practices or to (re-)institutionalize others are also secured at an institutional level. They need to be connected well enough to other relevant actors to give weight to their actions and to get their proposed norms, logics or practices institutionalized. Meanwhile, these connections could also lead to lock-in and lock-out effects, where ties with one particular actor place constraints on ties with other actors (Gulati, Nohria & Zaheer, 2000). The engagements of some environmental groups with firms in the UN Global Compact, for instance, arguably precluded other groups from participation in this program (see Mason & O'Mahony, 2008). Closely related is the fact that actors within one social network usually

belong to other social networks at the same time and thus contribute to a web of multiple ties (Mische, 2003). These ties can have different properties. Besides, it must also be noted that many dyadic relationships are neither strictly co-operative nor strictly competitive as they often involve mixed motives (Gulati, Nohria & Zaheer, 2000). A mere count of network ties, even if all different relevant networks were studied, thus certainly does not reveal the entire story.

Continuing on the properties of network ties, another relevant dimension is the degree of (formal) organization within an activist network. As den Hond and de Bakker (2007) note, people may either form activist groups by joining together into loosely organized networks, or, depending on their ability to mobilize sufficient resources, they may form activist groups that are more similar to formal social movement organizations: highly professional and internally differentiated organizations, aimed to shape and structure the social movement (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). When an activist network is considered, both ends of the spectrum will be visible and might even change over time, from very formally organized until nearly unorganized. Seel and Plows (2000: 113), for instance, characterize Earth First! as a direct action network, 'a series of overlapping and biodegradable networks that continuously change and adapt.'

In their overview of how network studies could inform the strategic management literature, Gulati, Nohria and Zaheer (2000) suggest looking at industry structures through network concepts such as network structure (density, reciprocity, equivalence, etc.), network membership (who is included and who isn't), and tie modality (strength of connections, nature of ties, etc.). From another strategic management angle, the resource-based view, they suggest that these three network concepts could be seen as resources. Network connections, for instance, could deliver competitive advantage through information exchange. Although Gulati, Nohria and Zaheer (2000) reason from a firm perspective, similar arguments may be made for activist groups. They compete with other actors in the network as well, if only for attention of a focal actor or for endorsements by their, sometimes shared, constituency. Network properties may yield them with an advantage that benefits their chances of promoting their view on CSR, that is, an advantage that strengthens their position in the constitutional struggles that institutional change involve. All these characteristic of social networks hence are expected to influence the way members of such a network are able to engage in institu-

tional change activities, either as propagators or as adversaries (i.e., defenders of an institutional *status quo*). In the next section I will discuss the link between social networks and institutional change.

Social Networks and Institutional Change

As I am interested in the way activist networks operate versus firms' political activities in processes of institutional change on issues of CSR, it is necessary to look beyond activist groups alone. One reason to look at activist networks is that activist groups play an important role in monitoring and criticizing firms. Like firms that act as institutional entrepreneurs beyond, or outside, 'normal' institutional field boundaries, in issues of CSR, activist groups try to take on a similar role. They try to have their say in the direction and form of any new initiatives under construction. Their focus on field level institutional change, almost by definition, implies a wider network approach; they need to engage in political activities to gain support for the proposed changes and have to involve other relevant parties in their field to garner support for their claims.

When social networks concerning CSR are considered, firms also need attention. The role of firms, often multinationals, in institution building is increasingly studied; such research on the relationship between firms and activists could provide suggestions on how their activities relate to each other (Bandy & Smith, 2005; Dahan, Doh & Guay, 2006; Trumpy, 2008). King (2008), for instance, uses a model from social network studies to explain why certain firms that are targeted by activists' boycotts are likely to concede to these demands. Media attention appeared to be an important factor in explaining firms' responses to what he calls extra-institutional tactics, amplified by these firms' previous experiences with reputational disputes. And even if firms' responses remain moderate, Rowley and Moldoveanu (2003) suggest that since targeting large, visible firms is more likely to catch media exposure, activist groups may decide to do so, even if the chance of success in terms of a real change in firm behaviour is fairly small. The reputational effect may be worth the effort for the activist group, even if no direct effect is established with the target firm. Likewise, it has also been suggested that to bring about field level change, radical activist groups are more likely to challenge pro-active firms, whereas reformative groups are more likely to challenge laggard firms and work with pro-active firms (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007).

Owen-Smith and Powell (2008) take the combination of perspectives further and

provide two reasons why networks and institutions could be seen as mutually shaping one another. First, networks are the carriers of institutional effects: they provide the channels through which institutional logics are transferred throughout an organizational field. Second, networks are stamped by institutional categories: institutional forces condition network configurations. They argue that networks both structure and integrate organizational fields. Following Podolny (2001), they note that 'networks are essential to fields in at least two senses: they are both a circulatory system and a mechanism for sensemaking' (Owen-Smith & Powell, 2008: 602). It is the wider network within an organizational field that can create support for the deinstitutionalization of disavowed practices or the (re-)institutionalization of alternatives. The legitimacy that is needed to substantiate claims is provided through a social network.

In an attempt to bridge social network studies and institutional theory, Kenis and Knoke (2002: 275) suggest the concept organizational field-net, which they define as: 'the configuration of interorganizational relations among all the organizations that are members of an organizational field. Thus, a field-net consists of a particular pattern of both present and absent links among the entire set of organizational dyads occurring in a specified organizational field.' They suggest several propositions to relate field-net properties, including for instance density, reciprocity, or centralization, to subsequent nonlinear changes in interorganizational tie-formation rates. All these properties frequently applied in network research are argued to have an influence on the shaping of the organizational field. Being involved within that field is important to be able to influence the dominant institutional logics. Through their activities, actors shape the field while the field also influences (enables, constrains) their activities: 'the field-net propositions should be seen as a specific attempt to articulate a process-oriented approach that treats social structure (field-nets) as both a product of and a constraint on organizational action' (Kenis & Knoke, 2002: 289). Activist groups engage both in action networks and in legitimization or governance networks, forming coalitions and pressuring firms directly. The number and quality of network ties, and their level of centrality could be useful measures here, as these groups pursue collaborative arrangements to gain easier and more efficient access to scarce resources and to build countervailing power (Shumate, Fulk & Monge, 2005). Network connectivity, then, is one of the ways to overcome problems identified in resource mobilization

studies (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Jenkins, 2001), as access to different resources is assured through a variety of network ties. One might expect that the ideological position of an activist group influences its ability and willingness to engage in network connectivity.

Conclusion: Activists, Networks and Norms

To examine the way networks of activist groups operate over time to influence institutional change on issues of CSR and how they respond to firms' political activities, in this paper I have discussed linkages between three streams of literature, social movement theory, institutional theory and social network analysis. Doing so responds to recent calls that knowledge on such issues in combination is relatively undeveloped (see Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008). This paper aims to provide a link between these theoretical streams; each one could deliver insights on these processes of institutional change but all of them also address only part of the process: the way networks of activists operate in processes of institutional change, especially versus firms, is often neglected in the literature. The paper thus provides a call to further our understanding of the way political processes around firms, especially on issues of CSR, are shaped. Instead of taking a firm's perspective as a point of departure, I highlighted the position of activist groups. Some cautions are necessary though. Being an initial theoretical exercise, the current exploration is probably incomplete and could be more detailed. Developing a set of propositions could be one next useful step. For instance, Kenis and Knoke (2002) list a range of propositions to understand the impact of communication at the level of an organizational field on tie-formation rates in social networks such as alliances or joint ventures. In doing so, they aim 'to explain how properties of the communication network in an organizational field-net influence subsequent rates of collaborative ties among the field member organizations' (Kenis & Knoke, 2002: 227). Although their work combines insights on social movements and institutional theory, their propositions do not look into activist organizations. Examining the applicability of their propositions in this specific context, rather than in one of alliances and joint ventures, would be a useful next step for this area of business and society research and could also be useful for the field of innovation management, given the potential impact of activist organizations on innovations, and in

particular disruptive innovation (see Weisenfeld, 2003; Hall & Martin, 2005).

Overall, I identify three other important areas for further research that need to be incorporated in the combination of social movement studies, social network analysis and institutional theory to strengthen the links between these perspectives to better understand how processes of institutional change on issues of CSR unfold over time. These three areas are: methodological difficulties, differences in institutional contexts and the international dimension.

Taking a social network approach on extended networks such as those on CSR-related activism, which encompass entire organizational fields (or 'field-nets' as Kenis and Knoke call them), is not easy given the multi-layered character of the issue under study. Many actors operate within one particular organizational field. Often, these actors are involved in a variety of other networks and fields at the same time, which feed them with insights and resources but which also hamper them in acting freely within the focal organizational field or study. Their 'other' ties might also be a burden; they certainly complicate things for researchers as it is difficult to monitor many interrelated networks simultaneously. This poses serious methodological difficulties. Smart selection of relevant subsets, then, are necessary to really conduct in-depth research on activists' tactics, and firms' responses, in such processes of institutional change. The literature on whole networks then might be helpful (cf. Provan, Fish & Sydow, 2007), but requires further research to capture activist groups' particular properties. In addition, the suggestions that Schneiberg and Clemens (2006) provide on studying institutional change might also be incorporated, while a focus on process research could help in getting beyond snapshot-like case studies.

The second area regards the institutional context. In the current paper, this context has been mentioned a few times but has not really been elaborated upon. Even more so, the role of actors other than activist groups in activist networks has hardly been discussed yet. Evidently, next to activist group characteristics, other factors may also affect the consequences of activist group challenges on firms. For example, Schurman (2004) argues that 'industry structures', which are composed of economic, organizational and cultural features, function to enhance or constrain social movements' efforts to change industry behaviour. The institutional context is likely to have an impact on the way CSR is shaped (Matten & Moon, 2008), and the room there is within an organizational field for activist groups to influ-

ence this process of institutional change will vary. Firms operating in different institutional contexts will respond in different ways. Firms' responses are increasingly being documented in the literature. Aguilera and colleagues (2007), for instance, offer a synthesis of the various motivating factors that explain why corporations engage in corporate social change activities, thereby placing the consequences of activist group pressure in perspective. Likewise, King (2008) tests hypotheses on the reasons why certain firms that are targeted by activists' boycotts are likely to concede to these demands. Yet, whether these findings can be replicated in other institutional contexts requires further research, as different networks are at play and different institutional logics are involved. Further work also remains to be carried out on the interaction process between different actors (i.e., also looking at the actions of firms, for instance) and the way this process is guided by different (institutional) logics (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008).

Finally, an area that has not been touched upon in the current paper is the vast literature on transnational activism and the role of networks therein (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Bandy & Smith, 2005; Tarrow, 2005; den Hond & de Bakker, 2012). According to Keck and Sikkink (1998: 217), activists in transnational advocacy networks use a variety of mechanisms, including framing their issues in new ways and broadening their 'network's scope and density to maximize its access to necessary information.' The link between networks and social movement organizations is well established in this literature and could further inform the ideas set out in this paper. This again provides a link to the field of innovation management where ideas about innovation in value chains also span a wider range of organizations (see Hall & Martin, 2005).

To conclude, in this article I aimed to illustrate that the social movement, social networks and institutional change literatures have several interesting points to offer, and could well be combined, to study the role of networks of activist groups in influencing the nature and level of CSR activities in companies. These theories all highlight specific elements of the processes activist groups try to influence. In discussing the interchange between social movement and institutional change research, McAdam and Scott (2005) propose viewing organizational fields as the fundamental unit of analysis, pointing at the roles of different actors during episodes of field-level change, just like Kenis and Knoke (2002), who point at field-nets. Studies on field frames and strategies for institutional change provide useful starting points in this direction:

'Looking at the roles of different actors in such processes... can contribute to our understanding of how influence strategies within organizational fields work, and thus of how corporate social change activities are being shaped' (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007: 920). The exploration in this article provides a starting point for further research into how activist group networks may influence the 'rules of the game' and thus stimulate innovative approaches to CSR; issues that could also inform the wider literature on innovation management.

Notes

1. Activist groups are just one possible label; other terms often used include social movement organizations (SMOs), civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), secondary stakeholders or interest groups. To highlight their *active* role in influencing CSR, and to refrain from an extensive definitional debate, I refer to these groups as activist groups. For a more extensive discussion of terminology, see Schepers (2006) or de Bakker and den Hond (2007).
2. Both activists' and firms' activities in this respect have been discussed extensively in the literature on framing (e.g., Snow, 2004; Deetz, 2007; Trumpy, 2008).

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Frank G.A. de Bakker is Associate Professor at the Department of Organization Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands. He received his PhD from the University of Twente. He has published in the *Academy of Management Review*, *Business & Society* and the *Journal of Business Ethics*, among others. His most recent book is *Managing Corporate Social Responsibility in Action* (Ashgate, 2007). De Bakker's research interests focus on processes of institutional change regarding corporate social responsibility and the role of social movement organizations and their networks therein. He co-edits several special issues, including ones for *Organization Studies* and the *Journal of Business Ethics*.